

Passing In Review

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Abstract

"You've been here three days, now. Tell me what is good and bad about our operation, what we should be doing about it, and where you think we should be going the next 5 years."

Passing in Review

Mason E. Miller

“You’ve been here three days, now. Tell me what is good and bad about our operation, what we should be doing about it, and where you think we should be going the next 5 years.” That’s the kind of assignment often given onsite review teams sponsored by USDA’s Cooperative State Research Service under the auspices of the land-grant universities.

It may sound like a tough assignment. It is. Teams put in long hours on an onsite review. But it is not an impossible task.

CSRS has long conducted onsite reviews of the agricultural research programs in the state agricultural experiment stations and other state research units receiving federal funds through CSRS. These have been in the more traditional areas related to agricultural research—agronomy, animal science, ag econ, etc. A program of onsite reviews of communication programs are relatively new but just as important.

Communication and information staffs are key to the dissemination of research results both to scientists and to others who can use the research results. They also are very

Cooperative State Research Service will sponsor communication reviews in five states this fiscal year. What’s a review? How does it come about? Who is on the team? Who benefits? These and other questions are the topic of this article in which first Mason Miller of CSRS lays out the general pattern for reviews. Then in the next issue, Tom Byrd (NC) tells what it is like to be a team member, and Glen Goss (PA) gives a roundup of some of the things that happen to host institutions because of a review.

important in the entire public relations program of a research unit. So while there aren't many states actually conducting communication research, communication is so basic and important to agricultural research and those who pay for it and use its results, that CSRS support for communication reviews still makes lots of sense.

What is an onsite review, anyway? In communication, it means that your experiment station director asks CSRS to organize a team of communication experts to come visit your university or research installation and talk over your communication programs.

So the review is state-initiated most of the time. And its purpose is to help you think about your communication organization and setup, what you would like it to be like, and how you can make that happen. The review goal is to be helpful to the state that asks for it.

The first thing in getting ready for a review is to decide what the objectives for the review will be—to look at current programs, or focus mainly on the future, both, or something else. Once that is decided, it is clearer what kind of expertise the team needs in order to help the most. If the review is of current media areas, then the team should consist of people with strong backgrounds in the specific media to be reviewed. If the review goals are more general and more looking to the future and what might be, then team members will need to have broader backgrounds and have organizational and administrative experience.

Reviews are short—the usual pattern is the team coming in to the university Sunday night for their first meeting, starting work Monday morning on the review process, and being all finished by Friday noon so the team can go home. That's moving fast!

The concept of such rapid assessments and appraisals is well set in CSRS operations. The idea is that a team of highly qualified specialists in a subject matter area can in a few days' intensive visit to an institution quite accurately assess the state of that institution's program, staffing, budgeting, etc., in relation to that subject matter area. While the team may miss details, and may occasionally interpret some facts differently than the host institution staff would, still a team is able in broad terms and often in surprising detail to make a very accurate and helpful assessment.

The strength of an onsite review by an outside team is most evident when it can highlight important features within

or beyond what the host institution staff see of their own world. Its weaknesses come from misconstruing or simplifying what actually goes on in the world that staff has to operate in.

The final tangible outcome of a review is a written report back to the experiment station director from the review team. But there are many, many other outcomes, as will be discussed later.

Much good can come from the preparation it takes for the host state staff to get ready for the review. In general, we have found that the more staff involvement there is ahead of time, the greater the impact of the review and the more happens as a result of the review.

The host state produces a notebook for each of the team members giving information about the communication staff and situation that will help the team land running. A good notebook will contain such information as a staff listing with responsibilities, biographies, perceptions of strengths and weaknesses of their programs; budget and salary information; charts showing how your unit relates to the rest of agriculture and the rest of the university; information about other support units such as printing plants, distribution systems, photo services, university information offices, and the like; statistics on the volume of work handled or produced in each media area; summaries of questions or topics the host staff would like the team to think about, observe, and then discuss with them. The exact contents vary, but these are some ideas of what is helpful.

The state and the CSRS representative work out who is to be on the team. Once the preferences for team members have been cleared with the host state, the CSRS representative makes contact with the experiment station directors the potential team members work for. Again, because information work to support research and experiment stations is much broader than just the experiment station, not only experiment station editors and science communicators assigned to experiment stations are considered. Extension staff concerned with science communication also serve on teams. Often university team members will have split appointments including part experiment station. Persons from industry and non-land-grant university also serve on teams. But the major criterion is to get the best people possible to do the kind of review that is needed.

CSRS will pay for four reviewers—the CSRS subjectmatter specialist as team leader, and three others. If the host State desires more, then it has to finance the extras. Teams usually consist of four. But occasionally a fifth member is added for a special purpose and/or special expertise that the other four members don't have.

A fair number of letters and telephone calls pass back and forth among the team members as the dates for the review approach. This is all part of the process of getting the team in gear, ready for the task ahead. In the meantime, part or all of the host state staff have been engaged in the thinking and developing that must go into producing the review notebook to get the staff and the team ready for the review.

What does the team do when it arrives at the host institution? It varies. In one state, the team found when it arrived that the dean was the one who had proposed the review and the information staff had had nothing much to do with it. So the team had to build its own agenda for the review right on the spot!

In another state, the entire staff had been busy thinking through their future, their organization, what they wanted to do. So in addition to educating the team about their operations, they spent a lot of time with the team wrestling jointly with some of the complex questions we deal with in agricultural communications—what kinds of research can we and ought we to be getting into, to what extent do we shift resources from traditional media to the newer media? To what extent are we public information vs. helping with educational communication? And so on. A very stimulating, exciting time for both the staff and the team.

In fact, a good team comes out of a review with as many good ideas and as much stimulation as an involved state staff does. "I'm glad we didn't try that! Now I know it won't work!" Or "Why didn't we think of that back home?! Such a good idea!" Or "That's a serious question. They haven't solved it, nor have we. How *do* you solve it?" Makes you sit back and think seriously about this whole job of ag communications.

What a team looks at during a review varies. But at least part of the function of a review is to have an outside group come in to help you look more broadly at your own job, at your position in the structure of the university, etc. Teams look at media production programs and outcomes, they look at staffing to see if that is adequate or structured most

usefully, they look at the environment within which the individuals and office work, and within which the total group works in the university. A team tries to find out about the environment in which the staff operates. What does that environment allow, offer as possibilities, place on as restrictions, help, etc.?

A good team is concerned about total picture of service and development for the staff in the host institution. They want to think about the production the staff does—how much is done, is that enough or too much, what might be shifted, what is its general quality, is it doing the job expected? Is it adequate for support of extension, experiment station, etc.?

But a good team also looks at research. Is the communication staff doing any research? If not, could it? If it could, how can that be encouraged and supported? If there is no possibility of the staff doing research, are there departments or units on campus who might do research for them? Are staff interested in research and/or research results? Do they read any education or communication research? Are they applying research results? How can these activities be encouraged?

And a team wants to look at the training and professional development for the communication staff. Is there the opportunity to do communication training? If not, could there be? Who is interested in doing training? What is being done if anything to support extension through communication in-service and preservice training of agents and specialists? And of scientists? Does the staff feel an obligation to their own commercial brethren—and take part in professional organizations for commercial communicators? Do they offer training for groups such as the state press association, or appear on their programs, or help them set up training?

In professional development, to what extent does the host institution offer communication staff opportunities and support for their professional development? Is the staff taking advantage of such opportunities? Do staff belong to the really professional organizations in their field of endeavor—and not just to the social ones? To what extent are staff working on advanced degrees? Or taking relevant courses and training for their own professional amazement and development? Are they eligible for sabbaticals? Do they go?

Are any of the staff teaching in the university? Could they? Is there an ag communication, journalism, broadcast,

audiovisual or other course or department that could use them as teachers occasionally? If there is an agricultural communications academic program of some kind, what is its tie to the ag communication staff? Could this be strengthened for the benefit of the students and the staff as well? Is there at least one course in the ag communication curriculum that exposes students to what our side of ag communications is all about?

What's this staff all about? What are they trying to do? How is their spirit, their morale, their dedication? How much potential is there in the university for them to grown, develop, change direction, take on new things, drop old responsibilities?

A team visits with everyone they can get their hands on who is relevant to the host staff. This may mean visiting with scientists, extension staff—both on campus and in the field—talking with most of the information staff and often with their secretaries and clerks as well, spending time on the phone or in person visiting with commercial media people to get some assessment from them of the services the university provides. Anyone and everyone is fair game. We have visited with vice-presidents of universities, heads of university printing plants, university information and radio and tv station staff—all to find out how they perceive the ag information staff, how we might foster more cooperation among information groups on campus to the benefit of ag information as well as the others.

That's the process. Now—what's it like to be a review team member? Tom Byrd and Glen Goss will report in the next issue.